

State and Private Forestry Redesign Initiative

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Project Name: Woodlands Protection Initiative: Integrating Stewardship, Forest Health, and Wildfire Protection Programs on Non-traditional Forest Lands

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Project Location: State of Texas (Central and West Texas)

Partnering Organizations: USDA Forest Service/Forest Health Technology Enterprise Team (FHTET) and Forest Health Protection, Forest Inventory and Analysis, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Oklahoma Division of Forestry, LBJ Wildflower Center, International Society of Arboriculture, Master Gardeners/Master Naturalists, Texas Cooperative Extension, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, The Nature Conservancy, National Park Service, Texas Soil and Water Conservation Board, Houston Advanced Research Center, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and others.

Abstract: The hardwood forests found in central and west Texas and western Oklahoma differ from the traditional pine and hardwood timberlands that dominate the Southern Region. The forest woodlands in this western fringe are prized for their beauty, shade, erosion control, wildlife fodder, recreation, real estate value, and watershed protection, rather than for manufactured forest products. Central Texas, in particular, has experienced explosive population growth in recent years as well as major forest health issues. The latter include a severe outbreak of oak wilt, unprecedented wildfires, an influx of non-native invasive plants, and critical watershed protection and ecosystem restoration issues. Forest resource information from this region has long been lacking. Indeed, Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) plots in central, south and west Texas were not initiated until recently (2004), but early results estimate the region contains millions of acres of non-commercial forest land. Technology is now available to develop vegetation maps, fire and oak wilt hazard (risk) maps, invasive species occurrence maps as well as urban change maps for this region. Such information will be the bases for developing a Woodlands Protection Initiative for central and west Texas (including comparable lands in western OK) that will integrate stewardship, forest health, and wildfire protection programs. This initiative will target the new generation of landowners and unique forest health problems that are impacting these woodlands.

	(FY 2008)	(FY 2009)	(FY 2010)
Salaries:	\$205,000	\$312,500	\$363,000
Travel:	25,000	24,500	26,500
Product Development/Delivery:	20,000	41,500	52,500
Partnership grants/Contracting:	25,000	100,000	130,000
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State Match:	275,000	478,000	572,000

Project Description: Central Texas is home to a majority of Texas' 22 million residents. In recent years, many residents have chosen to leave suburban areas to purchase and enjoy rural life on sub-divided "ranchettes" in a region once dominated by large ranches. The non-traditional forest lands in central and west Texas are prized for their real estate value, watershed protection, recreation, and other values, rather than timber production. Landowners in central and west Texas are faced with a changing landscape, an increasing human population, special protection needs (wildfire, oak wilt, invasive plants). The current programs of the Texas Forest Service have addressed oak wilt suppression, forest stewardship, and wildfire prevention, but these programs have not been well integrated or targeted for this the new generation of landowners. The present proposal is to develop a well-integrated Woodlands Protection Initiative (WPI) that incorporates components of stewardship, oak wilt management, watershed protection and restoration, and wildfire prevention, including wildfire risk/hazard reduction, among other forestry programs. Development and delivery of the WPI will rely on fostering partnerships and cooperation among diverse stakeholders. The Woodlands Protection Initiative and the associated funding requirements, will involve three stages, as follows:

Phase I (FY 2008): Resource Assessment

1. Develop and integrate available geo-spatial resources (forest vegetation maps, oak wilt hazard maps, invasive plant detection records, land ownership maps and Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment maps, available FIA data, and other data sources) into a common GIS data base (in partnership with FHTET and FIA).
2. Develop urban wildland interface change maps (urban sprawl) for this rapidly developing region of Texas by evaluating forest cover loss using sequential satellite imagery. Project future fragmentation and parcelization using Theobald GAP data to identify priority areas. This information will be essential for identifying emerging communities, planning the location of future TFS services, and for monitoring forest health problems and wildfire risk.
3. Establish regional steering committees with representation from diverse public and private stakeholders to coordinate activities among groups and mutually identify communities and watersheds at risk.
4. Incorporate available resource data and hazard maps into a GIS-based Woodlands Protection Initiative (WPI) for central Texas, and display information and accomplishments on the Internet. The Initiative would include stewardship, forest health, and wildfire prevention (public awareness and hazard mitigation) guidelines as well as contact information for TFS, Volunteer Fire Departments, and other natural resource agencies in the region.

Phase II (FY 2009): Program Integration and Delivery

1. Expand job descriptions and redirect responsibilities of TFS staff foresters currently involved in oak wilt suppression to provide comprehensive program leadership in multi-county regions of central and west Texas. This changing role would allow the limited staff to better leverage their time and resources towards outreach and overseeing partnerships. Activities

would no longer be limited to oak wilt suppression but would include working with partners to ensure total ecosystem protection and sustainability.

2. Foster and train partners in the region to increase public awareness of the WPI. Potential partners include ISA Certified Arborists, oak wilt vendors, Master Gardeners/Master Naturalists, The Nature Conservancy, Texas Soil and Water Conservation Board, National Park Service, LBJ Wildflower Center, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Texas A&M Cooperative Extension, and others. The WPI would serve as a template for other states experiencing similar challenges on non-traditional forest lands.
3. Develop Urban Wildland Interface Stewardship Training Modules (UWISTM) that TFS staff and cooperative partners would use to educate the public and landowners. The UWISTM will include videos, PowerPoint presentations, and brochures on fire prevention, invasive native and non-native plants, oak wilt and other forest health problems, stewardship, reforestation, wildlife management, ecosystem services, etc.
4. Provide incentives to selected communities/counties to employ professional staff to address their own stewardship and resource protection needs in the region, using partnership matching grants.

Phase III (FY 2010): Expansion of the Woodlands Protection Initiative

1. Expand Phase II activities. Work with additional emerging communities to share the initial cost of employing and training community protection specialists to adopt the WPI and more effectively address needs in wildfire prevention, tree care, oak wilt prevention, invasive plants, and forest stewardship, using partnership matching grants. Map a GIS layer of mitigation projects (fuels reduction, habitat management, oak wilt suppression, watershed restoration, etc.) by the various partners engaged in these activities.
2. Provide training sessions and public workshops (i.e., Woodland Expos) with other stakeholders to promote forest stewardship, forest health, and wildfire protection.
3. Promote, train partners, and assist with Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP), Southern Fire Risk Assessment System (SFRAS) evaluations, community forest health protection plans and other components of the WPI.

Evaluation Criteria:

National and Regional Relevance: The Southern Forestland Assessment has identified the central Texas region as a landscape of national importance. This proposal addresses the three national themes (Conserve, Protect, Enhance). The proposal is directly connected to the Regional Priority Issues of fractured forests, wildland fire and forest fuels, and forest health. The Woodlands Protection Initiative, once developed, could be expanded across the Texas state line to include western Oklahoma and serve as a prototype for non-traditional forest lands in other states.

Prioritization: The Woodlands Protection Initiative will be targeted in and around those forested areas determined to be of high risk for wildfires, oak wilt and/or conversion from woodlands to other uses, or areas in need of ecosystem restoration. These determinations will be based mutual consent from partners and regional steering committees, with inputs from the Southern Fire Risk Assessment, oak wilt hazard maps and other sources of resource information identified in Phase I.

Meaningful Scale: The Woodlands Protection Initiative will be made available as a GIS-based information system, posted on the Texas Forest Service web page. Training modules and support materials can be easily adapted for use in other areas having non-traditional forest lands.

Collaboration: Development and implementation of the Woodlands Protection Initiative will involve collaboration from a number of diverse partners that are stakeholders in the region. These include, but are not necessarily limited to the following: Forest Inventory and Analysis, Natural Resource Conservation Service, LBJ Wildflower Center, International Society of Arboriculture, Master Gardeners/Master Naturalists, the Nature Conservancy, The Nature Conservancy, National Park Service, Texas Cooperative Extension, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Houston Advanced Research Center, Texas Soil and Water Conservation Board, Oklahoma Division of Forestry, US Fish and Wildlife Service, USDA Forest Service/Forest Health Technology Enterprise Team (FHTET) and Forest Health Protection, and others.

Outcomes: Performance measures used to gauge the efficacy of this project will include number of partnering agencies involved, number of workshops held and participants trained, number of counties or communities that adopt the Woodlands Protection Initiative, and number of communities or cities that decide to employ full or part-time woodlands protection specialists.

Technology: To properly identify high risk areas upon which to focus the Woodlands Protection Initiative, TFS will utilize various GIS technology and available resource maps. These will include the fire risk maps provided by the Southern Fire Risk Assessment System, oak wilt hazard maps developed from historical records (www.texasoakwilt.org), in cooperation with FHTET, the Theobald GAP Analysis and UPLAN urban density/land-use impact models, the Southern Forest Land Assessment, FIA data and other available resource information.

Integrated Delivery: Once high risk areas are identified, TFS and various partners will actively contact communities and cities in these areas and target them for educational programs and protection workshops. These workshops will feature presentations and training from experts on a wide variety of local, regional and national resource protection and stewardship issues.

Leverage: TFS will work with many diverse federal, state, and private partners having vested interests in protecting and managing the central and west Texas landscape. The project will rely heavily on numerous public and private organizations who share a mission to protect the wooded landscapes of central and west Texas from destructive agents and adverse land use changes.

Influence Positive Change: The ultimate goal of the Woodlands Protection Initiative is to integrate and expand existing programs involving forest stewardship, forest health, oak wilt suppression, and wildfire prevention into one plan that focuses on identifying areas at greatest risk and encouraging communities within these areas to address their own protection problems. A self-sustaining, effective

and permanent protection initiative that reduces resource losses in this region of non-traditional forests will be the end product.

Timeliness: The timeline required to develop and implement the Woodlands Protection Initiative has been set at three years: FY 2008-2010.

Resources Available:

- Existing TFS Staff Foresters, Resource Protection Specialists and UWI Specialists in central and west Texas
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